

## LEAVING your child home alone...

Deciding when your child is ready to stay home alone is a difficult decision for parents. There is no set age, either prescribed by law or by child development experts. It comes down to a judgment call on the part of parents.

Fortunately, there are some guidelines and certain factors to consider, as well as things to do if you decide to leave your children home alone.

### To decide if your child can take care of himself, consider:

**His age.** Experts believe a child should be at least 12 before he is left alone, and at least 15 before he can care for a younger brother or sister. These are the minimum ages. Not every child is ready then

**His maturity.** Can he think things through, plan ahead, make good decisions.

**His ability to handle urgent situations.** Your child should show good judgment and follow your rules. He should know how to get help, what to do in a fire, how to deal with visitors and callers, etc.

**The environment.** Is it safe? Are there people nearby who can be trusted to watch out for your child?

**How long he will be alone.** An hour or two might be fine; a day may be too long.

**His feelings.** If he's nervous about being alone or isn't sure he can handle certain situations, he's not ready.

### If you feel your child can stay alone, give him what he needs to be safe, including:

**The house key.** Have him keep it in a safe, but hidden place, like a zippered part of his backpack.

**Phone numbers.** Next to the phone, post a number where you can be reached (or you might want to get a pager if you're not always near a phone) and numbers of two neighbors who are likely to be home and who have agreed to look out for your child. Tell them what time he comes home from school.

### Safety rules. When your child is home alone, he should:

- not enter the house if he sees something suspicious (e.g. an open door, broken window, strange people). He should go to a neighbor's house, call 911, then you. Not let anyone in. Delivery people can be told to go to a neighbor's house and repair people can come back.
- not tell anyone he is home alone. If someone calls, your child can say, "My mother (father) can't come to the phone right now. Can I take a message?"
- not go to anyone's house without your permission.
- Schedule a time each day to check in with one another.

### Teach your child:

- When to call 911 and what to say.
- How to prevent fires and what to do if one breaks out (E.g. get out of the house fast and call 911 from a neighbor's house).
- Basic first aid (some towns offer courses for children). Some towns and employers offer a "home alone" class for children; ask your town recreation department, school or employer.

Try leaving your child home alone for an hour or two and see how he does before you do it long term. Each day, talk to your child about what he did during the day. Ask him often how he feels about staying home alone. Review safety rules.

If you, or your child have any doubts, it is best to make other arrangements. Maybe another parent, college student, or local after-school program can help out.

If you need to find care for your child, check with INFOLINE (211), your relatives, neighbors and friends, your child's school, your city or town parks and recreation department, or a local YMCA/YWCA.